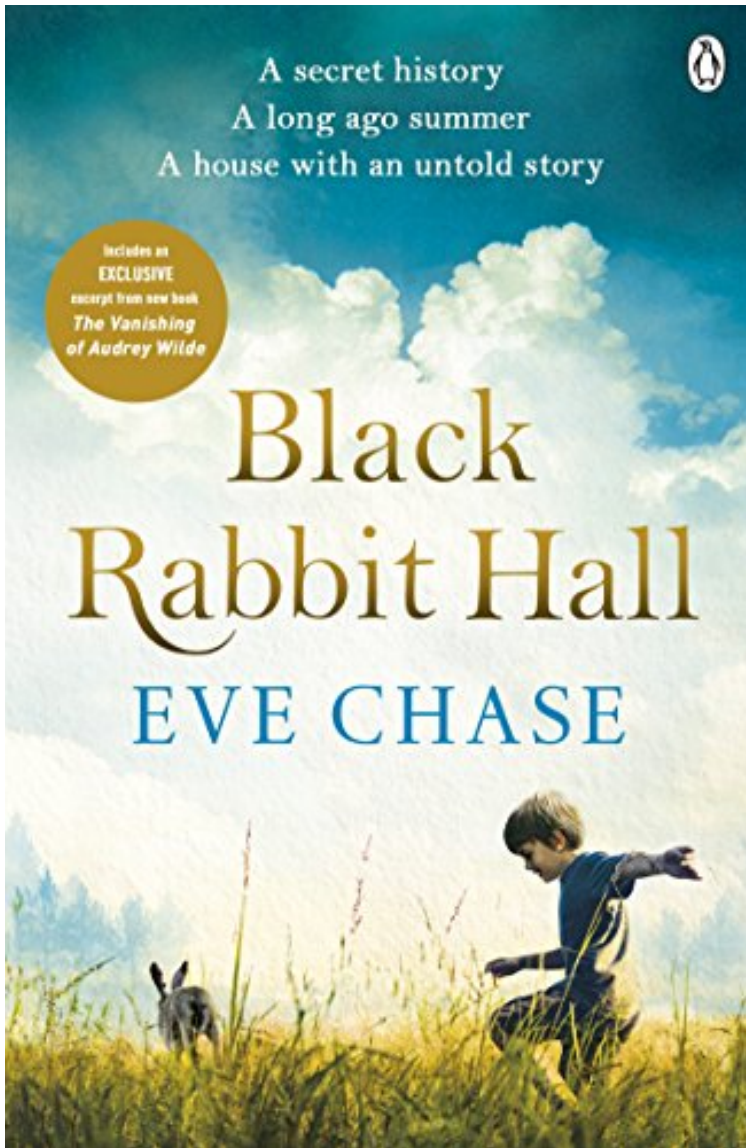


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Black Rabbit Hall



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur*** In anticipation of the author's new novel *The Vanishing of Audrey Wilde*, immerse yourself in the gripping *Black Rabbit Hall* ***One golden family. One fateful summer. Four lives changed forever. Amber Alton knows that the hours pass differently at Black Rabbit Hall, her London family's country estate where no two clocks read the same. Summers there are perfect, timeless. Not much ever happens. Until, one stormy evening in 1968, it does. The idyllic world of the four Alton children is shattered. Fiercely bonded by the tragic events, they grow up fast. But when a glamorous stranger arrives, these loyalties are tested. Forbidden passions simmer. And another catastrophe looms . . . Decades later, Lorna and her fianc wind their way through the countryside searching for a wedding venue. Lorna is drawn

to a beautiful crumbling old house she hazily remembers from her childhood, feels a bond she does not understand. When she finds a disturbing message carved into an old oak tree by one of the Alton children, she begins to realise that Black Rabbit Hall's secret history is as dark and tangled as its woods, and that, much like her own past, it must be brought into the light. A thrilling spiral into the hearts of two women separated by decades but inescapably linked by Black Rabbit Hall. A story of forgotten childhood and broken dreams, secrets and heartache, and the strength of a family's love. INCLUDES AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM EVE CHASE'S STUNNING NEW BOOK THE VANISHING OF AUDREY WILDE

Praise for Black Rabbit Hall 'Apart from the occasional classic, I have rarely felt the urge to read a book twice . . . Black Rabbit Hall's beautifully crafted mystery is a delight I want to experience again and again . . . make Chase's debut the one to pack in your suitcase *****' Stylist 'There's something about tales of mysterious old buildings that have the ability to set hairs on end. In this one, two intertwining stories explore the magnificence of Black Rabbit Hall and the dark secrets behind its walls. Perfect' Red 'Atmospheric, with echoes of Du Maurier, this haunting novel enchanted me' Fanny Blake, Woman Home 'Beautifully, poetically written and reminiscent of everything from I Capture The Castle to Hansel And Gretel. Eve Chase is a name to watch' Wendy Holden, Daily Mail 'Extrait AMBER Last day of the summer holidays, 1969, Cornwall I feel safe on the cliff ledge, safer than in the house, anyway. A few feet from the coast path, it's a twenty-minute scramble from the edge of the estate, far enough from Black Rabbit Hall's watching windows, a secret place. I hover on the cliff above it for a moment or two, wind snapping my dress against my legs, soles of my feet tingling, then lower myself carefully, gripping the clumps of grass, sea roaring in my ears. (Best not to look down.) One small heart-stop drop and I'm perching right on the edge of sky. Jump too wide, it's all over. I wouldn't do it. But it occurs to me that I like the fact I could. That I have some control over my destiny today. Pressed against the cliff wall, I finally catch my breath. So much frantic searching: woods, rooms, endless stairs. Heels rubbed raw in too-small tennis shoes. And I still haven't found them. Where are they? Shading my eyes from the sky dazzle with my hand, I scan the bottle-green cliff tops on the other side of the cove. Deserted. Only cattle in the fields. I inch down then, spine against the rock, and hitch up my dress, brazenly, so that air tunnels through my bare bent legs. Still at last, I can't outrun the events of the day any longer. Even the sound of the waves on the rocks makes my slapped cheek sting afresh. I blink and there is the house, silhouetted on the inside of my eyelids. So I try to keep my eyes open and let my mind loose in the vast pink sky, where the sun and moon hang like a question and an answer. I forget that I am meant to be searching. That minutes move faster than clouds at dusk. I think only of my own escape. I don't know how long I sit there, my thoughts pierced by a huge black bird diving over the cliff, so close its talons might catch in my hair. I instinctively duck in its wing draft, nose meeting the cool skin of my knees. And when I look up my gaze is no longer on the sky but on flotsam bobbing on the high tide swell below. No, not flotsam. Something more alive. A dolphin? Or those jellyfish that have been washing up in our cove all week, like a lost cargo of gray glass bowls? Maybe. I lean forward, dipping my face over the edge to get a better view, hair blowing wildly, heart beating a little faster, starting to sense something terrible shifting just below the shimmering blue surface, not quite seeing it. Not yet.

Lorna More than three decades later It is one of those journeys. The closer they get to their destination, the harder it is to imagine that they'll ever actually arrive. There is always another bend in the road, a judder to the dead end of a farm track. And it is getting late, too late. Warm summer rain is drumming on the roof of the car. "I say we cut our losses and head back to the Band B." Jon cranes over the steering wheel to get a better view of the road liquefying behind the windscreen. "Grab a pint and plan a wedding somewhere within the M25. What do you reckon?" Lorna draws a house with her fingertip in the condensation on the window. Roof. Chimney. Squiggle of smoke. "Don't think so, darling." "Somewhere with a sunny microclimate, perhaps?" "Ha. Funny." Despite the disappointments of the day so far - none of the wedding venues has lived up to expectation, too much overpriced chintz - Lorna is quite happy. There is something exhilarating about driving through this wild weather with the man she is to marry, just the two of them cocooned in their wheezing little red Fiat. When they're old and gray they'll remember this journey, she thinks. Being young and in love and in a car in the rain. "Great." Jon frowns at a looming dark shape in the mirror. "All I need now is a massive bloody tractor up my backside." He stops at a crossroads, where various signs, bent by the wind, point in directions that bear little relation to the angle of the corresponding roads. "Now where?" "Are we lost?" she teases, enjoying the idea. "The satnav is lost. We seem to have gone off grid. Only in your beloved Cornwall." Lorna smiles. Jon's is a boyish, uncomplicated grumpiness, one that will evaporate with the first sign of the house, or a cold beer. He doesn't internalize things, like she does, or make obstacles symbolic of other stuff. "Right." He nods at the

map on Lorna's lap, which is scattered with biscuit crumbs and folded haphazardly. "How are your map-reading skills coming along, sweetheart?" "Well ..." She scrabbles the map open, bouncing the crumbs off to join the empty water bottles rolling on the sandy car floor. "According to my rough cartological calculations, we're currently driving through the Atlantic." Jon huffs back in his seat, stretches out his legs, too long for the small car. "Brilliant." Lorna leans over, strokes his thigh where muscle fades the denim. She knows he's tired of driving down unfamiliar roads in the rain, touring wedding venues, this one, farthest away, hardest to find, saved for last. They would be on the Amalfi Coast if she hadn't insisted that they come to Cornwall instead. If Jon's patience is wearing thin, she can hardly blame him. Jon proposed back at Christmas, months ago, pine needles crunching beneath his bended knee. For a long time, that was enough. She loved being engaged, that state of blissful suspension: they belonged to each other, but they still woke up every morning and chose to be together. She worried about jinxing that easy happiness. Anyway, there was no mad rush. They had all the time in the world. Then they didn't. When Lorna's mother died unexpectedly in May, grief punched her back to earth and the wedding suddenly felt inescapably, brutally urgent. Her mother's death was a reminder not to wait. Not to put things on hold or forget that a black date is circled on everyone's calendar, flipping ever closer. Disorienting but also oddly life-affirming, it made her want to grab life in her fists, totter through the litter of Bethnal Green Road on a drizzly Sunday morning in her lucky red heels. This morning she wiggled herself into a sunshineyellow vintage sixties sundress. If she can't wear it now, when? Jon changes gears, yawns. "What's the place called again, Lorna?" "Pencraw," she says brightly, trying to keep his spirits up, mindful that if it were up to Jon they'd simply stuff his large, sprawling family into a marquee in his parents' Essex garden and be done with it. Then they'd move down the road, near his adoring sisters-swapping their tiny city flat for a suburban house with a lawn sprinkler-so his mother, Lorraine, could help with all the babies that would swiftly follow. Thankfully, it is not up to Jon. "Pencraw Hall." He runs a hand through his corn-colored hair, sun-bleached almost white at the tips. "One more shot?" She beams back. She loves this man. "To hell with it, let's go this way. We've got a one-in-four chance of getting it right. Hopefully we'll shake the tractor." He presses his foot hard on the gas. They don't shake it. The rain continues to fall. The windscreen is mashed with cow parsley petals, pushed into snowy drifts by the squeaking wipers. Lorna's heart beats a little faster beneath the crisp cotton of her dress. Even though she can't see much beyond the rivulets of rain running down the window, she knows that the wooded valleys, river creeks, and deserted little coves of the Roseland Peninsula lie beyond the glass, and she can sense them already, hulking out there in the mist. She remembers being on these roads as a kid-they visited Cornwall most summers-and how the sea air would rush through the wound-down window, blowing away the last trapped bits of grimy Greater London, and the stitch of tension on her mother's face. An anxious woman, her mother suffered from insomnia all her life: the seaside seemed to be the only place she could sleep. When Lorna was little, she wondered if the Cornish air swirled with strange sleepy fumes, like the poppy field in The Wizard of Oz. Now a small voice in her head cannot help wondering if it swirls with family secrets. But she decides to keep this thought to herself. "Are you sure this old pile actually exists, Lorna?" Jon's arms are straight and stiff at the wheel, eyes reddening with strain. "It exists." She pulls up her long, dark hair, twisting it into a top knot. A few strands escape, fringing her pale neck. She feels the heat of his glance: he loves her neck, the soft baby skin just below her ears. "Remind me again." His eyes return to the road. "Some old manorhouse you visited with your mum while on holiday down here?" "That's right." She nods enthusiastically. "Your mum enjoyed a stately, I know that." He frowns up at the mirror. The rain is falling in undulating silver sheets now. "But how can you be sure it's this one?" "Pencraw Hall popped up on some online wedding directory. I recognized it straightaway." Already so many things have faded-the hyacinth notes of her mother's favorite perfume, the exact click of her tongue as she searched for her reading glasses-but in the last few weeks other memories, long forgotten, seemingly random, have come into unexpected bright focus. And this is one of them. "Mum pointing up at this big old house. The look of awe in her eyes. It sort of stuck with me." She swivels the diamond engagement ring on her finger, remembering other things too. A pink-striped paper bag of fudge heavy in her hand. A river. "Yes, I'm almost certain it's the same house." "Almost?" Jon shakes his head, laughs, one of his big belly laughs that rumble against his ribs. "God, I must love you." They drive in companionable silence for a moment, Jon thoughtful. "Last day tomorrow, sweetheart." "I know." She sighs, not relishing the thought of returning to the hot, crowded city. "If you wanted to do something non-wedding-related?" His voice is disarmingly soft. She smiles, puzzled. "Sure. What sort of thing?" "Well, I thought if there was anywhere of ... significance you wanted to visit?" The words fall awkwardly. He clears his throat, seeks her dark eyes in the driver's mirror. Lorna won't meet his

gaze. Her fingers are loosening her hair so that it swishes down, hiding the flush of her cheeks. "Not really," she mumbles. "I just want to see Pencraw." Jon sighs, changes gears, lets the subject go. Lorna wipes the scribble of a house off the clouded window and peers through the cleared porthole, nose to the cold glass, looping in her own thoughts. "So. The reviews?" he asks. She hesitates. "Well, there aren't any reviews. Not exactly" He raises an eyebrow. "But I did phone and speak to a real live human being, the lady of the house's personal assistant or something. A woman called Endellion." "What sort of a name is that?" "Cornish." "Are you going to use that as an excuse for everything?" "Yeah, yeah." Lorna laughs, slides her feet out of her silver flip flops and rests them on the hard gray plastic of the glove compartment, pleased by the tan marks and that her pale pink nail varnish hasn't chipped. "She explained that it's a private house. First year it's been hired out. So no reviews. But nothing dodgy, promise." He smiles. "You can be such a sucker sometimes." "And you can be so bloody cynical, my darling." "Realistic, realistic." He glances into his mirror, eyes hardening. "Jesus." "What?" "That tractor. Too close. Too big." Lorna tenses in her seat, twists a strand of hair around her finger. The tractor does look menacingly large for this narrow road, which is more like a tunnel now, sealed by steep verges of solid rock and a roof of interlocked tree canopies. She grounds her feet on the floor of the car. "We're going to stop at the next field gate and see if we can manage a U-turn," Jon says, after a few more tight minutes. "Oh, come on ..." "It's dangerous, Lorna." "But-" "If it's any consolation, the house is sure to be like all the others, some B and B chancing it. A dodgy conference center. And if it's any good we won't be able to afford it." "No. I've got a feeling about this house." She tightens the coil of hair, pinkening her fingertip. "A hunch." "You and your hunches." "You were a hunch." She puts a hand on his knee just as the sinews of his muscles contract and his foot slams down on the brake. It all seems to happen at once: the squeal of rubber, the skid to the left, the dark form leaping across the road into the bushes. Then terrible stillness. A clatter of rain on the roof. "Lorna, are you okay?" He touches her cheek with the back of his hand. "Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." She runs her tongue around the inside of her mouth, tastes the metal of blood. "What happened?" "A deer. Pretty sure just a deer." "Oh, thank God. Not a person." He whistles beneath his breath. "Close call. Sure you're okay?" A rapping on the driver's door. The knuckles are hairy, the skin raw red. The tractor driver is a dripping mountain of orange anorak. Jon winds down the window apprehensively. "Sorry for the hard braking, mate." "Bloody deer." A man's face, as battered as the landscape itself, veers up to the window. He peers over Jon's shoulder and fixes his dull stare on Lorna. It is a stare that suggests he doesn't come across many petite thirty-two-year-old brunettes wearing yellow sundresses. A stare that suggests he doesn't come across many women at all. Lorna tries to smile at him but her mouth feels twitchy at the corners. She might burst into tears instead. It hits her how close they've just come to catastrophe. It seems all the more unbelievable because they are on holiday. She's always felt immortal on holiday, especially with Jon, who is protective, secretly rather sensible, and built like a hammer. "They get in through gaps in the hedging. Caused a crash only last month." The man blows a gust of stale breath into the small confines of the car. "Two mangled a few yards from this spot. Damn creatures out of control." Jon turns to Lorna. "Someone's trying to tell us something. Can we call it a day?" She feels the tremor in his fingers, knows she can't push him further. "Okay." "Don't look like that. We'll come back another time." They won't, she knows it. They live too far away. Their lives are too busy. They work too hard. When they get back, Jon's family building firm is due for a long project, some swanky new penthouses in Bow, while the first day of the September school term rears ever closer for her. No, it's all too difficult. They won't come back. And Cornwall is impractical. It's expensive. It asks too much of their guests. It asks too much of Jon. Her dad. Her sister. Everyone is indulging her only because they feel sorry for her losing Mum. She's not silly. "You don't see much traffic on this road. Where you folks going?" asks the tractor driver, scratching his bull neck. "You certainly picked the day for it." "Trying to find some old house." Jon reaches into the glove compartment for a sugar fix to steady his hands. He finds an ancient sticky mint, half unwrapped. "Pencraw Hall?" "Oh." The man's face withdraws into the cave of his hood. Sensing recognition, Lorna sits more upright in her seat. "You know it?" A brisk nod. "Black Rabbit Hall." "Oh, no, sorry, we're looking for a Pencraw Hall." "Locals call it Black Rabbit Hall." "Black Rabbit Hall." Lorna rolls it around her tongue. She likes it. She likes the name. "So it's near?" "You're practically on its drive." Lorna turns to beam at Jon, near-death crash forgotten. "One more turn off this lane-last chance to leave-that takes you into the farmland, what's left of it. Another half-mile or so before you hit the estate proper. You'll see the signpost. Well, I say you'll see it. Buried in the bushes. You'll need to keep a lookout." He stares at Lorna again. "Funny place. Why do you want to go there (If you don't mind me asking." "Well ..." Lorna takes a breath, ready to launch into the backstory. "We're checking it out as a wedding venue," Jon says before she

has a chance. "Well, we were." "Weddings(" The man's eyes bug. "'ll be damned." He glances from Lorna to Jon and back again. "Look, you seem like a nice enough couple. Not from round here, are you?" "London," they mutter in unison. The man nods as if this explains everything. He puts one hand on the rolled-down window, his fingers creating a fat glove of condensation on the glass. "If you ask me, Black Rabbit's not the place for awedding." "Oh. Why not?" asks Lorna, spirits sinking again, wishing him away. The man frowns, looks unsure how much to tell them. "It's not in any fit state, for one thing. The weather gnaws away at houses around here unless you throw money at them. No one's thrown nothing at that house for years." He wets his cracked lips with his tongue. "Word is there are hydrangeas growing through the ballroom floor, all sorts of funny things going on." "Oh ... I love that." Jon rolls his eyes, trying not to laugh. "Please don't encourage her." "I'd better get back on the road." The tractor driver looks bemused. "You two, take care, eh?" They watch him stamp away, listen to the thuds as he climbs the serrated metal steps to the cab of the tractor. Lorna doesn't know what to think. Jon does. "Hold tight! Look out for Bambi. I'm going to reversedown to the crossroads. We're going back to civilization and a nice cold beer. And not a moment too soon." Lorna presses her hand on his arm, enough pressure to show him she means it. "It'd be ridiculous to turn back now. You know it would." "You heard what the guy said." "We need to see it for ourselves, if only to discount it, Jon." He shakes his head. "'m not feeling it." "You and your feelings," she says, imitating his earlier comment, trying to make him laugh. "Come on. It's the one venue I'm desperate to see." He beatboxes the wheel with his thumbs, considers his position. "You'll owe me." She bends over the hand brake, crushes her mouth against the warm bristle of his jaw. He smells of sex and digestive biscuits. "And what's not to like about that?" A few moments later, the little red Fiat turns off the road, then rolls like a drop of blood down the wet green drive, the canopy of trees locking tight behind them. AMBER Fitzroy Square, London, April 1968 Momma was lucky not to have been more seriously hurt in the crash. That's what everyone says. If her taxi had skidded another inch to the right, they'd have smashed the Bond Street ballard front-on, rather than just clipping it. Momma got banged about any way, flying across the black cab with her shopping bags, only saving her face from the glass with her bent-backward hand. Her new fancy hats were not damaged. The taxi driver let her off the fare. Still, not lucky, exactly. Ten days later, she's still got a custard-yellow bruise on her kneecap, a sprained wrist in a splint. She has to sit, sit, sit on a Saturday morning, rather than play tennis in Regent's Park or chase my little sister around the garden. Right now she is sitting in the turquoise chair by the parlor window, her stockinged leg planked on the footstool, staring at the black umbrellas wheeling about the square below. Her eyes have gone distant. She says it's the painkillers. But I can tell Momma is dreaming of being back at Black Rabbit Hall, or her old family farm in Maine, somewhere remote and wild where she can ride her horses in peace. But Maine is too far away. And Black Rabbit Hall feels even farther. "Can I bring you some more tea, ma'am?" asks Nette, respectfully averting her gaze from the startling bruise on Momma's leg. Nette is the new-three months new-help. She has a lisp impersonation is irresistible-and has moved from an old-fashioned household in Eaton Square, "where they're still pretending it's 1930," Momma says. I think Nette prefers it here. I would. "Or another cushion?" "No, thank you, Nette. You're so thoughtful. But I'm quite comfortable, and have drunk so much tea in the last few days that I fear another cup might send me quite over the edge." Momma smiles, revealing the gap between her two front teeth that makes her smile seem so much bigger than anyone else's. She can stick a match in it. "And, Nette, please feel free to call me Mrs. Alton or, indeed, Nancy. No need to be formal here, I promise." "Yes, ma-" Nette catches herself, smiles shyly. She picks up the empty teacup and half-eaten Battenberg and slips them soundlessly onto the shining silver tray. Boris beats his tail, gives her his best doggy eyes. Although she's not meant to give the dog treats-Boris is a fatty, a glutton, and once demolished a pound of butter in one sitting, then vomited it up on the stairs-I know Nette feeds him in the kitchen when no one's looking. I like her for this. "Come here, you," Momma says to me, once Nette's gone. She pulls up the piano stool beside her, pats it. I sit down and lay my head on her lap, inhaling her skin tang through the lettuce-green silk of her dress. She strokes my hair. And I feel like both her confidante and her baby, and that I could stay here forever, or at least until lunch. Not that her lap will be mine for long: there are too many of us-me, Barney; Kitty; Daddy; my twin, Toby, when he's back from boarding school. Sometimes it feels like there isn't enough of her to go round. "Your leg looks like a root vegetable, Momma." "Why, thank you, honey!" "Your other leg is still nice, though," I say quickly, glancing down at it, long, slim, foot stretched, pointing like a ballerina's, the second toe intriguingly longer than the first, punching out beneath the raised stocking seam. "One pretty leg is enough. And the other looks a lot worse than it is, really." She wraps a strand of my hair around her finger so that it looks like one of the tasseled red silk ropes that tie back the

curtains. We sit like that for a while, the carriage clock ticking, London rum bling outside. "A penny for your thoughts?" "Grandma Esme says you could have been killed." I can't stop thinking about the crash. The black ballad waiting for the black taxi. The screech of brakes. The hatboxes flying into the air. Things you can't imagine ever happening happening. "It makes me feel ... I don't know." She smiles, bends over me, the tips of her copper hair tickling my cheeks. I can smell her Pond's face cream. "It'll take a lot more than a cab on Bruton Street to kill me. New England genes, honey." I stare at her swollen leg again, look away quickly, wishing I hadn't. The bruise is making me feel really strange. Nothing bad normally happens to Momma. She doesn't get flu. Or headaches. Or the thing that Mrs. Hollywell, Matilda's mum, has that means she must go back to bed after lunch most days and sometimes can't get up at all. On the upside, if this is the bad thing that was going to happen to Momma, then I guess it's not that bad. At least it's out of the way. "Please don't worry about me, Amber." She smooths my forehead with the pad of her thumb. "The young must never worry about their parents, you know? Worrying is a mother's job. Your time will come for all that." I frown at the floor, unable to join the dots between being fourteen years old and becoming a wife and mother myself.

What happens to your twin when you marry? What would Toby do then? It bothers me. "It's all right." Momma laughs. "You've got a while yet." "Will you still be able to ride Knight?" I say, quickly changing the subject. Knight is her Dutch Warm blood. The name makes him sound black, but he's the color of chestnuts. "Ride Knight? Are you kidding?" Momma sits up straighter, winces. "If I sit in this chair for much longer I'll go crazy. I can't wait to ride Knight. I'll damn well hop to Cornwall to ride him if I have to." Knowing Momma, this isn't as unlikely as it sounds. "In fact, this evening I plan to talk to your father about leaving for Black Rabbit Hall sooner than normal." "When sooner?" She shuffles on the cushions, unable to get comfortable. "Next week sooner, if Peggy can get the house ready by then." "Next week?" My head springs off her lap. "But the Easter holidays don't start for another two weeks." "You can bring schoolwork if you want." "But, Momma-" "Honey, you spend far too much time with your head in a book, anyway. Missing a bit of school is not going to hurt anyone. Too much school isn't good for any child." "I'll fall behind." "Nonsense. Miss Rope says you're racing ahead of the rest of the class. I'm not in the least worried. Besides, you'll learn far more at Black Rabbit Hall than in a stuffy old classroom in Regent's Park." "What sort of things?" I ask doubtfully. "Life!" I roll my eyes. "I think I know enough about life at Black Rabbit Hall by now, Momma." She looks amused. "Do you, indeed?" "And I'm getting too old for sandcastles." "Don't be silly. One is never too old for sandcastles." My life has been full of sandcastles. My first memory is of Toby, bent over on the beach, frantically digging, sand flicking over his shoulder in a golden arc. (He is left-handed, I am right, which means we can stand close together and not knock spades.) When it's done he sticks two razor-clam shells-"Us," he says and grins-on the very top: we are three years old. "Apart from anything else, the air in London is just terrible," Momma continues. "And the relentless drizzle! My goodness, will it ever stop?" "We spend most of our time in Cornwall wearing mackintoshes." "Yes, but it's a different kind of rain in Cornwall. It is! A different kind of sky too. A clear sky with stars. Shooting stars, Amber! Not that smoggy old thing." She points at the gray ceiling of clouds outside the window. "Hey, don't look like that. It's something else, isn't it? What is it?" "It's Matilda's birthday party in nine days," I say quietly, imagining all my classmates giggling in Kensington Palace's Orangery in pastel party dresses; Matilda's older brother, Fred, down from Eton, the way one side of his mouth curls up when he smiles; Matilda herself, my closest friend, who is kind and funny and never pretends to be less smart than she is, unlike all the other girls. "I absolutely cannot not go." "It's a shame it's Matilda's, I know. But it's still one party, honey." I don't say that I'm not the type of girl who gets invited to lots of parties. But I think Momma knows this because her voice goes soft: "It may not feel like this now, Amber, but you have many parties to come, I promise." She nods over to the window. "Take a look out there. At the street. What do you see?" I gaze out of the window at the crescent, the rivers of wet pavement, the black iron railings, the planet of grass in the center of the square where we sometimes eat Bovril toast on sunny Saturday mornings. "People shaking and closing their umbrellas." I turn to her, wondering if this is the right answer. "A nanny pushing a pram?" "You know what I see I see a whole world waiting for you, Amber. Look, there's a young woman in a neat little skirt suit walking to work." Note: Momma doesn't work, but she wears a navy skirt suit from Paris for church on Sundays. I guess that's work too. "I see a couple on a bench kissing"-she raises one eyebrow-"rather passionately, I must say." I look away from the embracing couple quickly-obviously I wouldn't if Momma wasn't sitting next to me-and wonder how it would feel to kiss someone like that on a public bench, so lost in the kiss I didn't care who saw. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that you're going to have lots of fun before you get married." School. Finishing school. A job at Christie's, maybe. It's hard to see that there's much

room left for the fun bit before it stops. "So you're not going to worry about missing one party(" Momma fixes the dress flat over her thighs where my head has rumbled it. "Suppose." "Not a very convincing answer." I try to hide my smile beneath grumpiness, enjoying the pretense that Momma needs my approval, the pretense that I might not give it, that it matters at all. I know I am lucky like this. My school friends all get bossed about by their mothers, polite, faintly irritated English women in stiff dresses who never seem to throw back their heads and laugh so that you can see the wiggly bit in their throat. My mother can ride bareback. She wears denim jeans when we're in the country. And she's by far the prettiest mother at the school gate. "Never forget how privileged we are still to have Black Rabbit Hall. So many of Daddy's friends have had to demolish their country houses and sell off the land, or open their homes to the public, awful things like that. We must never take it for granted." "It takes ages to get there." "We'll all drive down together. It'll be fun." She nudges me. "Hey, maybe one day they'll open an airport on the Roseland." "That's never going to happen." "Well ... good." She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "We don't want to make it too easy, do we?" "Then it wouldn't be our special place." I say this shamelessly, to please her. And it does. "Exactly!" She grins and her eyes glint from green to yellow, a leaf and its underside. Filled with light again, distance gone. "I always say to Daddy that Black Rabbit Hall is the one still sane point in this mad, changing world. It's our safe, happy place, isn't it, Amber?" I hesitate. For some reason it feels as though everything rests on my answer. *Revue de presse* Black Rabbit Hall is a seductive wonder of a novel; with echoes of Daphne Du Maurier and Dodie Smith, it pulls you irresistibly into its world where nothing is quite as it first appears. (Elizabeth Fremantle) --Elizabeth Fremantle